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ABSTRACT

This study, undertaken at a Michigan high school, examined the development of collaborative relationships among school personnel, community members, and agency staff for the effective transition of students with disabilities from school to adult life. It attempted to identify the essential components and common barriers to such relationships and the effects of the Work-Based Mentorship program on students. To identify essential components and barriers, interviews were held with 14 school personnel and 7 community/agency people. Both school personnel and community/agency people reported teamwork and core members' commitment as the major facilitating factors in forming collaborative relationships for an effective transition process. Both of these groups identified "lack of understanding of and familiarity with the nature of services community/agency people can offer" as the most important barriers to forming such relationships. Analysis also examined employers' evaluations of students in the mentorship program, vocational education teachers' views, and students' journals and exams. Results indicated the program helps students to improve their work skills, self-confidence, self-determination skills, communication skills, sense of responsibility, and academic achievement. (DB)

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SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES:
A Potent Partnership for Development of a Transition System

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Since the early 1980s, educators, researchers, and policy-makers have been investigating the school-to-work transition process in order to improve the postschool outcomes of individuals with disabilities. Recent legislation has reinforced the importance of the transition from school to adulthood for students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, IDEA (P.L. 101-476), mandated transition services for all students age 16 and older in special education. The IDEA Amendments (1990) defined the term "transition services" as "a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing education, adult services, independent living, or community participation" (Section 300.18). Likewise, the Reauthorization of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (1992, P.L. 102-569) delineated the important role of vocational rehabilitation in transforming federal transition policy at the adult service level.

After analyzing 15 exemplary transition programs, Kohler, DeStefano, Wermuth, Grayson, and McGinty (1994) identified key program elements and practices of effective transition programs. The largest category of key elements, career and vocational variables, included vocational assessment, supported employment services, employability-skills curriculum, vocational training programs, on-the-job training, and career-education experience. The second largest category of key elements, systematic interdisciplinary transition planning, comprised parental involvement in planning; multidisciplinary transition teams; individual plans; objectives and activities of the individual transition plan (ITP) reflected in the individual education plan (IEP); identification of vocational, residential, and

social outcomes; and written transition plans. Across categories, other frequently cited variables included community-based instruction, community-referenced curricula, interagency coordination of services, integrated settings, education provided in the least restrictive environment, and provision of social skills training.

Kohler (1994) proposed a taxonomy for transition programming that comprised student development, student-focused planning, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structure and attributes. The student development component included life-skills instruction, employment-skills instruction, career and vocational curricula, structured work experience, vocational assessment, and accommodations and support. The student-focused planning component included IEP development, student participation, and accommodations and planning strategies. The interagency collaboration component included individual-level planning, interorganizational framework, collaborative service delivery, organization-level planning, and human resource development. The family involvement component included family training, family involvement, and family empowerment. The "program structure and attributes" component includes program philosophy, program policy, strategic planning, program evaluation, resource allocation, and human resource development.

All of the institutions and agencies whose mission is to nurture and strengthen children and families must collaborate to achieve a successful transition from school to work. No single institution or agency has the resources or capacity to do the job alone. Implementing a school-to-work transition policy for individuals with disabilities requires systems change (Taymans & DeFur, 1994). Systems change is defined as a revision of the ways that people and institutions think, behave, and use their resources to affect fundamentally the types,

quality, and degree of service delivery to children and families (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). The new system should be a profamily system that is preventive, family centered, outcomes oriented, and sensitive to race, culture, gender, and individuals with disabilities. The key to systems change is collaborative strategies, in which partners share a vision, establish common goals, and agree to use their power to achieve them. Commitment of resources and willingness to alter existing policies are vital parts of such strategies. The service delivery systems affecting transition planning and programming typically include special education, vocational education, rehabilitation, adult service providers, and medically related services (White & Shear, 1992).

The U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1993) proposed a five-stage process for building a new system. Each stage embraces a set of milestones that let the collaborative know it is making progress. A picture of this process looks much more like a spiral than a line. Following the direct route may seem the fastest way to reach an end point, but in dealing with systems change it is not always the most efficient or effective method. A collaborative team often will find themselves repeating milestones as new people are engaged and as the group continues to clarify its purpose and intentions. As a collaborative team continues this spiraling process, it gains greater commitment to its vision of a profamily system and progress will happen more rapidly.

Because building a transition system from school to work is based on a team of individuals working together, members should develop relationships by recognizing the unique and important roles each can play, learning respect and appreciation for each other's

roles, and finally learning how to work together within the transition process (Taymans & DeFur, 1994). Factors such as negative attitudes, misconceptions, lack of knowledge of other fields, turf issues, and lack of previous training or experience in interdisciplinary teaming often present barriers to collaborative work for an effective transition process (West, Taymans, Corbey, & Dodge, 1993).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the essential components and the barriers to forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community members and agency staff for an effective transition process. Three research questions were posed in this study: (a) What are the essential components in forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community members and agency staff for an effective transition process? (b) What are the barriers to forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community members and agency staff for an effective transition process? and (c) What are the effects of the Work-Based Mentorship program on students?

METHODS

The Setting

Holt High School, a suburban school of 1,000 students, is located in Holt, Michigan. For the past five years, it has been a Professional Development School (PDS) affiliated with Michigan State University. Teachers in a PDS are committed to changing their practice of teaching to include all students, including those with disabilities. The mandate to develop a transition process for students with disabilities has fostered an interest in incorporating the school-to-work initiative in the core curriculum. Thus, a new emphasis in the school has

been on developing a curriculum that connects school-based learning to the work place for all students.

Four years ago, Holt Public Schools was awarded a restructuring grant to better support students with disabilities. Since then, the Education Plus project, a restructuring grant funded by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) Programs, has been studying a collaborative coalition for the transition process. Holt High School defined transition as an outcome-oriented process measured by the fact that a final transition plan is in place (at graduation) and students can self-advocate by articulating their plans, including their goals and the resources they need to operationalize their plan. The Transition Coalition consists of special and general education teachers, counselors, administrators, students, parents, community members, and service agencies. The task of the Transition Coalition is to construct a transition system that will address the postsecondary vocational, independent-living, social, and emotional needs of all students, particularly students with disabilities and those who are at-risk.

The Procedures

The Transition Coalition identified strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the current service delivery system using case studies. Through monthly meetings and subcommittee meetings the Transition Coalition selected three goals. The first goal was to develop a series of forums for parents of special education students, informing them of the special education IEPC process, transition, and issues related to disabilities. The second goal was to establish a cross-district task force to develop a model for a self-determination curriculum, including life

skills, employment skills, career/vocational skills, structured work experience, vocational assessment, and accommodations support. The third goal was to develop a plan to increase school personnel's awareness and understanding of community agencies' resources and how to access them.

The parent subcommittee selected three parent objectives. The first objective was to plan a districtwide conference on transition for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and agencies. The second objective was to develop an orientation for parents and students who were newly enrolled in special education, informing them of characteristics of disabilities, the IEPC process, transition, and services of community agencies. The third objective was to organize a parent support group for parents of students with disabilities.

To accomplish the second goal, school personnel, community members, agency staff, and business people designed and implemented the Work-Based Mentorship Program as a pilot program. This program was offered as an elective course for a diverse population of students, including honor students and those with disabilities. It offered a planned, comprehensive, community-based experience for high school students and adult employers to work and learn together. Adults from various careers shared with the students information about their careers through the Career Exploration Fair. Agencies had the students complete a vocational assessment to determine their career interests and preferences. School personnel helped the students develop career plans and acquire vocational skills such as writing a resume and interviewing. Then the students were located in work sites and attended Friday debriefing sessions. Students' progress and the development of their career plans were discussed at parent meetings.

The essential components and the barriers encountered in developing a transition system among the school, the community, and service agencies needed to be addressed so that new roles and responsibilities could evolve. To investigate the essential components of and the barriers to designing and implementing an effective transition process, the grant evaluator interviewed 14 school personnel and seven community and agency people, using semi-structured interview questions. To investigate effects of the Work-Based Mentorship Program on the students, the grant evaluator analyzed nine employers' evaluations , 16 students' journals and exams, and reflective papers of two vocational education teachers and two special education teachers.

RESULTS

What are the essential components in forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community/agency people for an effective transition process?

School personnel reported teamwork (64%), core members' commitment (64%), regular meetings (57%), parental involvement (29%), case studies as a tool (21%), administrative support (7%), awareness of each other's resources (7%), and common interests in children's education (7%) as facilitators to forming collaborative relationships with community/agency people. Similarly, community/agency people reported teamwork (86%), core members' commitment (86%), willingness to change (43%), regular meetings (29%), administrative support (14%), and common interests in children's education (14%) as facilitators to forming collaborative relationships with school personnel. Both school personnel and community/ agency people reported teamwork and core members' commitment as the major facilitators to forming collaborative relationships for an effective transition process (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Essential Components in Forming Collaborative Relationships

Essential Components	% of School Personnel (n=14)	% of Community/ Agency People (n=7)
Teamwork	64% (n=9)	86% (n=6)
Core members' commitment	64% (n=9)	86% (n=6)
Regular meetings	57% (n=8)	29% (n=2)
Parent involvement	29% (n=4)	0%
Case studies as a tool	21% (n=3)	0%
Agency's active involvement	14% (n=2)	0%
Awareness of each other's resources	7% (n=1)	0%
Administrative support	7% (n=1)	14% (n=1)
Common interests in children's education	7% (n=1)	14% (n=1)
Willingness to change	0%	43% (n=3)

What are the barriers to forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community/agency people for an effective transition process?

Both school personnel and community/agency people indicated the extent to which each potential barrier presented a hindrance to forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community/agency members. Possible barriers were ranked by assigning points to each option: Not a barrier (0), A minor barrier (1), and A major barrier (2). Both school personnel and community/agency members reported "lack of understanding of and familiarity with the nature of services community/agency people can offer" as the most major barrier to forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community/agency members. In addition, school personnel reported "negative attitude and unclear expectations," "rigid and strict working schedule," and "resistance to changing the

systems" as major barriers. In contrast, community/agency people reported "lack of flexibility in funding for services," "hidden and implicit rules of the school system," "lack of trust," "rigid and strict working schedules," "resistance to changing the systems," and "differences of rules and regulations" as major barriers. Ranks of barriers to forming collaborative relationships between school personnel and community/agency people are shown in Table 2.

What are the effects of the Work-Based Mentorship Program on students?

To investigate the effects of the Work-Based Mentorship Program on students, nine employers' evaluation, reflective papers of two vocational education teachers and two special education teachers, and 16 students' journals and exams were analyzed. According to the employers, the students' performance had been outstanding in (a) following age-appropriate directions, (b) working with others cooperatively toward a common goal, (c) demonstrating punctuality, (d) notifying employer of tardiness or absence, (e) completing job tasks on time, (f) completing job tasks according to specifications, and (g) learning new tasks or skills receptively. Employers also reported that the students' performance had been questionable in asking for help when a situation required assistance and keeping busy during working hours.

According to reflective papers written by two vocational education teachers and two special education teachers, the students (a) gained self-confidence, (b) demonstrated an improved sense of control and responsibility, (c) improved communication skills, (d) made major changes in their physical appearances, and (e) demonstrated academic improvements.

Table 2.
Ranks of Barriers to Forming Collaborative Relationships

Potential Barrier	School Personnel (n = 14)	Community/Agency People (n = 7)
Barriers Related to Teamwork		
1. Negative attitudes and unclear expectations	2	8
2. Lack of understanding of and familiarity with the nature of services community/agency members can offer	1	1
3. Hidden and implicit rules of the school system	12	3
4. Lack of trust	11	4
5. Unclear goals	5	12
Barriers Related to Logistics		
6. Rigid and strict working schedules	2	4
7. Lack of flexibility in funding for services	5	2
Barriers Related to Process		
8. Difficulty adopting a different frame of reference	7	12
9. Lack of coordinating collaborative efforts	9	8
Barriers Related to Context		
10. Ownership issue	9	12
11. Issues of entitlement to limited services and resources	11	8
12. Resistance to changing the systems	2	4
13. Differences of rules and regulations	12	4
14. A traditional, narrow view of schooling, teaching, and learning	7	8

According to an analysis of 16 students' exams and journals, students could (a) clarify their work adjustment issues (75%), (b) strengthen their career interests (63%), (c) establish life goals and future plans (50%), (d) develop a stronger sense of their individual strengths (44%), and (e) develop a stronger sense of responsibility (44%).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirmed and extended the findings of previous research (Kohler et al., 1994; Taymans & DeFur, 1994; West et al., 1993; White & Shear, 1992) regarding an effective transition process from school to work. Data confirmed that essential components of effective transition programs include vocational assessment, employability-skills curriculum, on-the-job training, systematic interdisciplinary transition teams, objectives and activities of the ITP reflected in the IEP, written transition plans, and interagency coordination of services.

Changing a current system of services is a long-term undertaking. Systems often seem to resist change. Hence, partners interested in integrating services must develop a process of change that is powerful enough to overcome multiple layers of resistance-in attitudes, a frame of reference, relationships, and policies-within and across service-provider institutions, among consumers, and throughout the community (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). To form collaborative relationships between school personnel and community/agency people, they need to familiarize themselves with the types of services each other can offer (West et. al., 1993). Administrators and policy makers should consider barriers related to logistics-rigid and strict working schedules

and lack of flexibility in funding for services-when they design and implement a transition process from school to work.

Through the School-to-Work Mentorship Program, students can improve their work skills, self-confidence, self-determination skills, communication skills, and sense of responsibility. In addition, the students can improve their academic achievement.

One of the limitations of the present study is that the results were based on preliminary data analysis. Thus, the results should be interpreted with caution. Future research should be conducted to measure quality-of-life factors represented by physical and material well-being, performance of a variety of adult roles, and a sense of personal fulfillment (Severson, Hoover, & Wheeler, 1994).

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